

For Your Information

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Former Soviet prisoner and refusenik Natan Sharansky, Burmese human rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi, and Iranian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani are some of the many people across the globe who were unjustly imprisoned for their beliefs. Fortunately, these three men and women of conscience are now free. We applaud their lives and the work they have done to advance the cause of freedom and dignity for all.

Unfortunately, many people today are not free but languish in jail cells around the world. They are imprisoned because of who they are, what they believe, and how they have chosen to express their convictions. These prisoners are prevented from enjoying the most fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international standards.

We must shine a light on these prisoners of conscience until they are free and the countries that keep them in bonds have released them and have implemented needed reforms.

To that end, as Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), I join the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives and Amnesty International, USA in support of our joint Defending Freedoms Project. Through this project, members of Congress will select prisoners across the globe to support, highlight their causes, stand in solidarity with them, and let them and the world community know that they are not alone. In addition, by training a spotlight on the laws and policies that have led to their incarceration, members of Congress will be working both for their release and to hold offending governments accountable.

This new initiative will rely not on laws or customs that are specific to any one country, including our own, but on universal human rights benchmarks to which nearly every nation has assented. It will use the same internationally approved standards, freely agreed upon by most of the same countries which violate them in practice, to hold those states responsible for abusing the innocent.

Representatives Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Frank Wolf (R-Va), who have taken the lead in this project, are longtime champions of human rights worldwide. My late father, Tom Lantos, was proud to call them colleagues and friends, and worked closely with them on Capitol Hill for many years.

Sadly, as we survey the global landscape, it is clear that there are walls of tyranny in far too many places, and compared to these barriers, our words and deeds might appear humble

indeed. But as the late congressman Jack Kemp once said, “there is a kind of victory in good work, no matter how humble.” And in the words of the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy, “each time...[we]...strike out against injustice, [we] send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other....those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Let these memorable words stir our hearts, deepen our commitment, and strengthen our resolve as we open a new chapter in the cause of human rights and universal dignity.

Katrina Lantos Swett is the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This article is adapted from her December 6, 2012 speech on Capitol Hill at the announcement of the Defending Freedoms Project.

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